

VZCZCXYZ0000  
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHML #3266/01 2710459  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
O 280459Z SEP 07  
FM AMEMBASSY MANILA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8417  
INFO RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE  
RHHMUNA/CDRUSPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 003266

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/28/2017  
TAGS: [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [MCAP](#) [PREL](#) [RP](#)  
SUBJECT: POSITIVE CHANGE IN ARMED FORCES LEADERSHIP, BUT  
CHALLENGES REMAIN

REF: A. MANILA 2474 (JULY BASILAN ATTACK)

[1](#)B. MANILA 2714 (MILITARY SHOWING RESTRAINT)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney for Reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: A wide-ranging overhaul of armed forces commands in recent weeks has shifted some of the most capable and seasoned veterans in the Philippine military into key leadership positions. The command changes, along with a distinct tactical shift toward more carefully targeted military actions and an increased emphasis on improving civil and social infrastructure in Mindanao, signal that the government's commitment to military reform is real and concrete. Despite a structural shift in doctrine that has improved its image and brought battlefield successes, the Philippine military still faces challenges both from Muslim terrorist groups and from pockets of internal dissent resistant to the changes being pushed by President Arroyo and Defense Secretary Teodoro. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) In late August, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) carried out sweeping leadership changes in both headquarters and regional commands that reflect a strengthened emphasis on reform and its desire to implement policies that bolster long-term stability. New leaders for the Army, Marines and six other commands were brought in at headquarters, while the heads of five regional commands and the Special Operations Command also were changed. Embassy military experts as well as Philippine military officials widely view the new commanders as some of the most qualified individuals in the armed services. In addition to combat experience, they bring a potent mix of leadership, vision, management, and loyalty to the top echelons of the armed forces.

-----  
Seeing Success From Better Training,  
Focus on Civil-Military Operations  
-----

[1](#)3. (C) The command changes are indicative of the momentum behind Philippine Defense Reform, both in the government and military, and the armed forces' increased emphasis on improving military capabilities while building civilian infrastructure and social goodwill to mitigate support for terrorist and insurgent elements. The new commanders have shown a willingness to adapt their tactics to include significant civil-military operations, and with U.S. help, the training and civil-military operations are beginning to pay dividends.

14. (C) Following brutal attacks against government forces on Basilan and Jolo in July and August by Abu Sayyaf and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) forces that resulted in the deaths of 56 AFP troops (including 10 marines who were beheaded), the military exercised restraint and discipline (REFTELS A and B). Commanders did not order their troops blindly into battle, instead choosing to conduct targeted operations that quickly brought down the temperature of an overheated situation -- and resulted in the death or capture of key Abu Sayyaf and insurgent leaders. Although the terrorist groups may have been trying to bait the AFP into reprisal attacks to gain support among the local population, AFP units continued to conduct civil affairs projects in concert with their military actions. Many believe new Army chief LtGen Alexander Yano will continue this measured approach. "Jess" Dureza, adviser to President Arroyo on the peace process, described Yano as "a tiger," but also a "charismatic diplomat" who is determined to win the hearts and minds of his enemy. "While he's a good combat soldier, he has a peace paradigm," Dureza said.

15. (C) U.S. forces operating in support of Philippine operations in Mindanao have similarly noted more rapid adaptation and operational improvement on the part of Philippine units in the last year. From enhanced effectiveness of air support for ground forces, to improved intelligence sharing, to a greater ability to conduct integrated operations in difficult terrain, Philippine forces have shown that in a short time, they have taken training from the classroom into the field, taking steps to eliminate the terrorist threat while engaging the civilian population to change the conditions that foster terrorism. Medical civil action programs conducted by AFP and U.S. forces in the first two weeks of Ramadan in September were a recent example of this strategy. Respecting religious sensitivities, the

events were conducted in the evenings to ensure that they were consistent with the restrictions placed on practicing Muslims during Ramadan.

-----  
TOP OFFICERS, DEMANDING ROLES  
-----

16. (C) New Army chief LtGen Yano perhaps best characterizes the leadership and judgment skills common to many of the new commanders. As tactical leader during a 2001 hostage crisis in Mindanao, he successfully directed the release of over a hundred hostages and liberated the Cabatanga complex in Zamboanga City from more than 300 armed members of a breakaway Muslim insurgent group. Yano's extensive contact with the U.S. military over his career, including visits to Parris Island and Ft. Bragg in 2004, appear to have shaped his ideas on training. He is focused on building a disciplined army, saying that "military adventurism will not be tolerated," and is seen as a potential successor to the current armed forces chief of staff, General "Jun" Esperon. Yano, who hails from Mindanao, is admired for leading by example. "I believe our commanders must be with the men in the field, sharing difficulties and closely supervising their actions," Yano said in his change of command address.

17. (C) Other notable assignments include the new commander for Western Mindanao, Marine Major General Nelson Allaga, who will now be at the forefront of fighting Abu Sayyaf elements and Moro Islamic Liberation Front insurgents on Sulu and Basilan; Major General "Ben" Mohammed Dolorfino, new commander of the Philippine Marine Corps; and Major General Jaime Buenaflor, commander of the newly formed National Development Command, a civil-military operations group which will focus the efforts of its three engineering battalions on infrastructure and health improvements on Basilan. Dolorfino, the highest-ranking Muslim in the Philippine armed forces, is described as a "level-headed fighter," similar to his predecessor Allaga, and is popular among the Marines. Buenaflor, former deputy for civil-military efforts, is well-suited to leading the National Development Command

inaugurated in September, whose purpose is to enhance prospects for peace in Mindanao by bringing village-level road, water, sewer, school and health improvements to communities most badly affected by the long-running conflict in the South.

-----  
INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL THREATS STILL EXTANT  
-----

¶18. (C) Despite these successes, very real external and internal threats remain. A total of 19 officers accused of plotting failed 2003 and 2006 coup attempts are still in custody, and how the military courts handle the judicial process will be scrutinized by opposition groups and the public. During a September 18 press event, Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro was asked about the threats from inside the military. While some in the audience initially dismissed the question as spurious, Teodoro answered that there was "a small but persistent threat," and that the challenge was to identify and engage those individuals who were dissatisfied. The next day, General Esperon announced that six junior officers had been sacked on coup rumors.

¶19. (C) In the fight against terrorists, the AFP continues to apply steady pressure, especially on the islands of Jolo and Basilan. On September 23, a day-long firefight on Basilan between Philippine military forces and Abu Sayyaf units left two soldiers dead and ten wounded. The engagement was a stark reminder that while the AFP is making great strides in reducing the effectiveness of the terrorist groups, the fight for security is ongoing.

¶10. (C) The September 23 engagement with the Abu Sayyaf, while tragic, profiled a tangible example of how the AFP is improving its operational capability. On the day before the attack, U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force personnel had conducted a training seminar at the Western Mindanao Command Headquarters on casualty evacuation techniques. Of the 30 Filipino civilian and military personnel who participated in the seminar, many were involved in the evacuation operation following the firefight the next day. U.S. personnel cite the reduction in response time (from an average of three hours to one hour) in evacuating the injured soldiers as the key reason that the death toll was not higher.

Visit Embassy Manila's Classified SIPRNET website:  
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eap/manila/index.cfm>

You can also access this site through the State Department's  
Classified SIPRNET website:  
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/>

KENNEY